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SUBJECT: SHEIKH OF AL AZHAR DISCUSSES COUNTERING EXTREMISM

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1.(SBU) Summary: During a May 7 introductory call, the Ambassador and Grand Imam Sheikh Mohammed Sayyed Tantawi, head of Egypt's Al Azhar institution and Egypt's senior Islamic cleric, discussed Al Azhar's role in combating extremism and promoting tolerance and interfaith understanding. Tantawi also expressed Al Azhar's appreciation for the Mission-supported English language program, established in the fall of 2007, to provide English instruction to junior theology and Arabic language instructors. Finally, Sheikh Tantawi said Egypt welcomes any U.S. assistance that leads to "prosperity and development." End summary.

2.(SBU) Al Azhar, a religious and educational institution, includes Egypt's oldest university and serves as a pan-Arab center for Sunni thought and education. In addition to the university in Cairo, Al Azhar operates schools throughout Egypt, and, according to Tantawi, has over 2 million students studying at the elementary, secondary and university levels. Tantawi spoke proudly of the international nature of Al Azhar, and said it currently has students from 104 countries.

3.(SBU) According to Tantawi, an Al Azhar education is based on the rejection of extremism and fanaticism. He reiterated his condemnation of the September 11 attacks and the killing of innocents. While he said that people are "not angels" and "bad things" happen, he sees Al Azhar's mission as educating students so that they understand Islam's peaceful, non-violent nature.

4.(SBU) While Tantawi acknowledged that Egyptians and Americans do not share all religious beliefs, he said that is no barrier to cooperation. Tantawi said that the U.S. and Egypt share "mutual interests," and cooperation benefits both countries. Prompted by a question from the Ambassador on how best the U.S. can help Egypt, Tantawi said Egypt would welcome any assistance that led to "prosperity and development."

4.(SBU) Tantawi stressed Al Azhar's role in fostering equality. He said that Islam draws no distinction between men and women, and asserted that over half of Al Azhar's students, including at the university level, are women. On interfaith issues, Tantawi cited his excellent relations with the Coptic Church patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, and said that all Egyptians should be treated equally, regardless of religion. In September 2007, Tantawi announced that he had no objection to Christians studying at Al Azhar, a position he repeated during the meeting.

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